

Mohsen Goudarzi*

Mecca's Cult and Medina's Constitution in the Qur'an: A New Reading of *al-Mā'idah*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2024-0003>

In Memory of Ahmad Mahdavi Damghani (1926–2022)

وداع كعبه جان چون توان كرد، فراقش بر دل آسان چون توان كرد

Abstract: The Qur'an's fifth *sura* denounces the killing of game during pilgrimage and decries the killing of innocent Believers. This juxtaposition reflects the intimate connection between right worship and proper social order, between cult and covenant, a connection that animates the entire *sura*. In particular, the *sura* suggests that if Jews and Christians have been generally unreliable allies, if they have been often reluctant to support the Believers' military efforts against the Quraysh, and if they were even unwilling to requite violence against innocent Believers, it was because the People of the Book mostly had a negative view of the Meccan Sanctuary and its rituals. Specifically, they derided the central rite of *ṣalāt*, which may have been accompanied with sacrifices on certain occasions (such as Fridays). In the light of their opposition to the Meccan cult, the *sura* commands the Believers not to take Jews or Christians as covenantal partners. It is possible that the *sura* thereby ended the Believers' alliance with some Jewish tribes of Yathrib as enshrined in the Constitution of Medina. What supports this possibility is that *al-Mā'idah* has significant thematic and terminological overlaps with the Constitution of Medina, as alliance with the Jews and deterring violent crimes through retaliation are central concerns to both documents. Still, and contrary to the interpretations of several scholars, it is doubtful that at the time of *al-Mā'idah*'s proclamation the Prophet had judicial authority over the People of the Book or that he sought to impose violent punishment against them.

Keywords: Qur'an, al-Mā'idah, Constitution of Medina, Meccan sanctuary, cult, *ṣalāt*, sacrifice, Jews

Article Note: I am grateful to Karen Bauer, Abdulla Galadari, and Michael Lecker for reading this paper, offering many helpful suggestions, and drawing my attention to various relevant sources. I also thank *Der Islam*'s anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

***Corresponding author: Mohsen Goudarzi**, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, m.goudarzi@hds.harvard.edu

This study aims to shed some light on the Medinan phase of the Prophet Muhammad's activity through analysis of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*. The study's main arguments are threefold. First, *al-Mā'idah* shows that worship, its cultic infrastructure, and its associated rituals were major concerns in the Qur'anic milieu. In particular, the Meccan sanctuary was central to the Believers' military efforts against the pagans (*mushrikūn*) and their disagreements with the People of the Book. Two sections of the *sura* provide regulations for the Believers' cultic rituals (vv. 1–6, 87–103), and in particular outlaw the intentional killing of game during pilgrimage. Moreover, the *sura*'s critique of the People of the Book (in particular the Jews) targets their perceived disregard for the venture to take back the Meccan sanctuary. They had not contributed financially or by manpower to the war effort against the Quraysh (v. 12) – like their ancestors who were reluctant to fight for the conquest of the Holy Land (vv. 20–26) – and they even mocked Allāh (the Lord of the Ka'ba) as unable to fund the cause Himself (v. 64). Their apathy and unreliability stemmed from their disdain for the Mecca-focused rituals of the Believers, including the central ritual of *ṣalāt* (vv. 57–58). The Believers should thus take as allies and covenantal partners not those People of the Book who mock their worship and *ṣalāt* (vv. 51, 57–58) but rather other Believers who are committed to their cause and their rituals, namely, those who “perform *ṣalāt*, pay *zakāt* (alms), and bow down” (v. 55).¹ In connection with these statements, I explore whether the *ṣalāt* of prophetic times was accompanied with sacrifices on certain occasions (perhaps on Friday), and whether the Qur'an considered Jewish and Christian worship as amounting to *ṣalāt* and *zakāt*.

Second, the study analyzes the position of *al-Mā'idah* on the relations between the Believers, Jews, and Christians. Several scholars have claimed that *al-Mā'idah* establishes the Prophet as a supreme judge over the People of the Book and legitimates violence against some of the Believers' Jewish contemporaries (esp. in Q 5:33). However, I argue that caution is warranted about these claims. Specifically, many verses in the *sura* imply that Jews and Christians were powerful and influential, while other verses indicate that the Prophet and the Believers did not have dominance or judicial control over the People of the Book. The violence that the *sura* demands in Q 5:33 may have targeted a group that was *allied* with the Jews and protected by them even after this group had committed aggression against the Believers. In this scenario, the consequence that those Jews faced was not their own punishment but the end of their alliance with the Believers.

¹ While using the term “Believer,” I concur with Karen Bauer that the “terms ‘believer’ and ‘unbeliever’ fail to convey the extent to which the Qur'anic designations indicate proper comportment,” in particular, as pertained to worship (“Emotive Rhetoric, Plot, and Persuasion in a *Jihād* Sura (Q 8 al-Anfāl),” in *Unlocking the Medinan Qur'an*, ed. Nicolai Sinai, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 480–512, at 484).

Third, the paper shows that *al-Mā'idah* overlaps considerably with the so-called "Constitution of Medina" both in terms of main themes and terminology. In particular, two questions lie at the center of both documents: alliance with the Jews and deterring violent crimes through retaliation, which in turn had bearing for the war effort against the pagans. The Constitution shows the tenability of the idea that the aggression mentioned in *al-Mā'idah* concerned a group *allied with* the Jews. The historical relationship between *al-Mā'idah* and the Constitution is difficult to discern. It is possible that *al-Mā'idah* announces the end of the alliance that the Believers had made with the Constitution's Jewish parties, although one may regard the *sura* as prohibiting *future* alliances instead of revoking old ones.

The study opens with a brief discussion of the sociopolitical importance of sanctuaries and their systems of worship in the ancient world. Next, it discusses the significance of the Meccan sanctuary and its rituals in the qur'ānic milieu, in particular, by revisiting the terms *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf*. This preliminary discussion sets the stage for the analysis of roughly the first half of *al-Mā'idah*, which forms the second and main section of the paper. The third and final section analyzes the Constitution of Medina, shows its similarities to *al-Mā'idah*, and probes the lessons to be learned from their comparison.

The Meccan Cult

Scriptures and Sanctums

Some historians have dubbed Judaism and Christianity as "book religions" on account of the importance that these traditions came to assign to authoritative writings. In these traditions, a textual canon became a primary site for the manifestation of the sacred, and the recitation and exegesis of this canon turned into a major devotional practice.² Before the rise of these traditions in Late Antiquity, religious devotion in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean consisted primarily of the performance of rituals such as sacrifice and pilgrimage that assigned only a subsidiary function to texts or verbal formulae. These rituals were often performed in sanctuaries and temples, which generally housed one or more deities and had an associated system (including personnel, taboos, calendar, festivals, offerings, and prayers) for performing worship in honor of these deities. Jan ASSMANN has used

² On the early development of the "religions of the book," see Guy STROUMSA, *End of Sacrifice*, 28–55.